

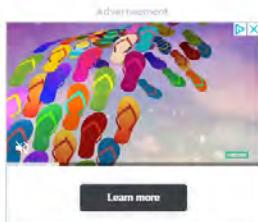
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Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta battles weather: Mass ascension grounded by fog

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A balloon is inflated at the 2019 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019, in Albuquerque, N.M. The event got off to a rocky start with heavy fog preventing balloonists from launching on Saturday, the first day of the event. The spectacle has grown over nearly five decades and infuses millions of dollars into the economy each year.

ROBERTO E. ROSALES, THE ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL VIA AP



Hot air balloons are inflated during the annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019.

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Hot air balloons are inflated during the annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019.
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Pilot Jason Kimball of Napa, Calif., inflates his balloon on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019, in Albuquerque, N.M.
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Hot air balloons are inflated during the annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019.
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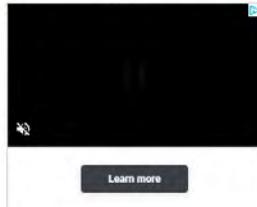
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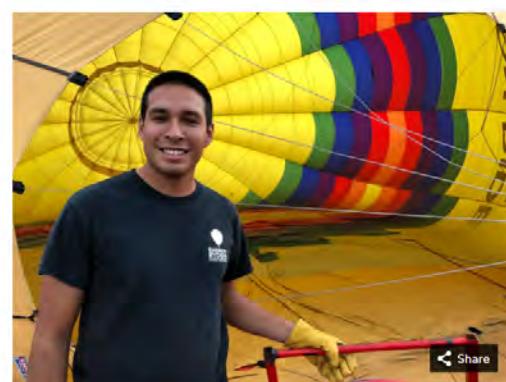
Hot air balloons are inflated during the annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019.

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The 2019 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta got off to a rocky start with heavy fog preventing balloonists from launching on the first day of the event, Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019, in Albuquerque, N.M.

ROBERTO E. ROSALES, AP



Elijah Sanchez poses for a photo while inflating a hot air balloon in Albuquerque, N.M., on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2019. Sanchez, 20, was scheduled to be among the youngest pilots to launch as part of this year's Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.

SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN, AP





Hot air balloons are inflated during the annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, N.M., on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2019.

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Alfred Eisenstaedt, 1934 \$30,000 to \$45,000.

In Brief

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta van Gogh's For It!

Sometimes artists soar, specially when they're transformed into a hot air balloon.



by Sarah Rose Sharp
October 11, 2018



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Van Gogh before takeoff (via Brian Crawford's Flickrstream)

We all know that some artists can sometimes be full of hot air, but we rarely say it as a compliment. But at this year's Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, a mega-Van Gogh balloon awed and delighted the crowd.

The festival, which runs for 9 days in October, began in 1972. Over the decades it has become one of New Mexico's signature events, beloved by a coterie of hot air balloon enthusiasts, locals and visitors alike. Each year features hundreds of hot air aviators showing off their crafts in marquee colors, some of which feature standout custom shapes or characters.



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aviators showing off their crafts in marquee colors, some of which feature standout custom shapes or characters.



The fiesta at sunset (via Jonathon McDougall's Flickrstream)

Signature aspects of the festival have evolved over the years, including Dawn Patrol, a nighttime launch to establish safe conditions for festival activities and indicate ballooning conditions in the pre-sunrise hours. Mass Ascensions, which, despite sounding like a cult going bad, is actually when all participants simultaneously launch in two waves, filling the sky with hundreds of balloons at once. The Fiesta Challenge is where participants attempt to drop a marker closest to a target from the air; and a crowd favorite is the Special Shapes Rodeo, of which our buddy Vincent was a head-turner this year.

Hands down my favorite new special shape this Fiesta. Van Gogh, piloted by Herman Kleinsmit of the Netherlands. #BalloonFiesta
pic.twitter.com/hNVLUqAGu6

— Christine Pae (@ChristineKOAT) [October 6, 2018](#)

Obviously, the dynamics of hot air balloon shapes must temper whimsy with engineering acumen, lest the brave pilots of the vessels find themselves in peril. Van Gogh was piloted by Herman Kleinsmit of the Netherlands, who can congratulate himself on an artful turn at this year's Fiesta. Hopefully historians will forgive the apparent presence of both the balloon's ears.

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is on from October 6-14 — be there or be square, which is a bad shape for a hot air balloon.

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Hundreds of hot-air balloons launch over New Mexico's largest city after COVID-19 hiatus

By Associated Press Oct. 2, 2021



JERRY LARSON/WACO TRIBUNE HERALD VIA AP / 2019

Hot-air balloons fly over Albuquerque, N.M., during the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. The balloon festival is returning after a pandemic hiatus with plans to launch about 540 hot-air balloons in a stunning visual spectacle.

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. >> Hundreds of hot-air balloons created a colorful tapestry against a blue sky today as New Mexico's largest city began a nine-day annual event that was canceled last year due to the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

The 7 a.m. mass ascension was the first of five scheduled for the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, a heavily photographed event that draws visitors from around the world.

The 2020 fiesta was canceled as a precaution against the spread of COVID-19.

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Organizers said over 540 balloons were registered for this year's event. The 2019 fiesta drew nearly 600 balloons from across the U.S. and 17 other countries.

Fiesta organizers said they won't be checking for vaccination cards but noted precautions are being taken to preserve social distancing and provide access to hand sanitizer and hand-washing stations.

Indoor dining for balloon pilots and VIPs has been canceled.

More than 80 balloons that come in special ornate or cartoonish shapes will be disbursed throughout the launch field, rather than clustered together — encouraging crowds to spread out, Fiesta spokesman Tom Garrity said.

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Making science soar in Albuquerque



Story Hinckley/The Christian Science Monitor

Spectators gather around hot-air balloons of varying designs at the 2018 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque, N.M., on November 7.

November 13, 2018

By [Story Hinckley](#), Staff writer[@storyhinckley](#)

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.

Inspired by a rainbow of flying orbs buoyed by flaming jets and coasting on the Albuquerque breeze, Kai and Hunter Wilson rush to pilot their own hot air balloon.

Not a real hot air balloon, of course. The young brothers get to work setting aloft a mini gondola suspended beneath a helium balloon at the 7-Eleven Balloon Discovery Center, where visitors to the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta can experiment with the scientific principles behind hot air ballooning.

"We've come every year for about seven years, and this is always my favorite part," says their mother, Marina Wilson, motioning to the balloon levitating above her son's head. "This interaction with the kids makes it all worth it."

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For almost 50 years, the annual balloon fiesta has attracted millions of visitors to the Land of Enchantment to see the world's largest ascension of hot air balloons. In recent years, the fiesta has developed into an educational event, teaching visitors about atmospheric science – a difficult topic to grasp, say scientists, but one that is increasingly important to understand amid climate change.

"[The discovery center] comes from the whole educational philosophy of trying to get kids interested in science, and let them know there is science behind ballooning," says Barbara Fricke, a member of the fiesta's board of directors. She says the center has grown a lot in recent years.



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"It used to be an old balloon that people could put their hands on, and now they try to educate," says Ms. Fricke.

To kick off the festivities, pilots launched balloons from more than 100 area elementary schools, introducing students to the science behind ballooning. And at the nine-day fiesta, visitors can visit the discovery center to learn about what makes Albuquerque ideal for ballooning.



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In the pop-up discovery center, visitors catalog experiments in "passport" books. Last year the tent ordered 10,000 passports, says staffer George Carrillo Jr. They ran out before the end of the week.

"The majority [of visitors] are kids," says Mr. Carrillo, "but even the adults come back and say, 'We learned so much about science.'"



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Thousands of spectators hold a collective breath as a trial balloon rises to test flying conditions for hundreds of balloons lying limp on the grass.

As the rising sun begins to turn the Sandia Mountains watermelon pink, the trial balloon pilot signals to ground staff to raise a green flag. Guests exhale a sigh of relief – their 5 a.m. (or earlier) wake-up alarm was worth it. Balloons will fly today.

Pilots will only ascend in perfect conditions. Fortunately for local ballooners, the Rio Grande Valley hosts a rare confluence of wind, temperature, and aridity each October, giving Albuquerque the nickname “the ballooning capital of the world.”

Because balloon pilots can only control the vertical direction of their balloon, they depend on wind currents to move horizontally. The balloons launch just after sunrise, when the air is cold, the sky is clear, the wind is calm, and they have the best chance of finding the weather phenomenon known as the Albuquerque box.

“There’s this box circulation that the balloonists love and that only sets up once or twice during the balloon fiesta period,” says David Gutzler, a climatologist at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

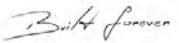
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When the Albuquerque box is active, cool, low-altitude surface winds trapped near the Rio Grande Valley floor push balloons south toward downtown.

The pilots ascend into the sky by lighting a flame above the gondola, heating the air inside the balloon to rise above the cooler air. Upon reaching a higher altitude, the balloon can hitch a ride on the warmer air currents above the Sandia Mountains and sail north before descending again to catch the low-altitude surface winds and complete a boxlike course.

“On the perfect box day, you can land your balloon right where you took off,” says Dr. Gutzler.



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A bridge to climate science

Across the launchpad, a field large enough to fit 56 football fields, young families stroll among swelling balloons. They eat cheesy arepas hot off the griddle and warm their hands on cups of coffee. The valley's cold morning air is necessary for the balloons, but it can still numb guests who wear hats and winter coats.

This year's fiesta attracted almost 900,000 guests, the majority of them from out of state. And while the fiesta has become an international cultural event, many guests are drawn as much by the science as by the spectacle.

"He loves science," says Sonja Ramirez, gesturing to her vigorously nodding son. "We were talking about it earlier, what makes [the balloons] go up and why we have them here in Albuquerque."

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But just as the global temperature has steadily risen in recent decades, temperatures during the fiesta have gradually risen, too, since the first event in 1972. Locals comment that the fiesta morning chill loses a bit of its bite each year.

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Time spent in the fiesta's discovery center can help the public to understand the science behind those climatic changes.

"Thinking about ballooning, and what goes into something like the balloon fiesta, all of that is a straightforward application of atmospheric physics," he says. "We apply that same basic thinking to climate change."

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